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ABSTRACT

To increase knowledge about the nature of news (particularly its valuation and presentation conventions), to enrich understanding of communication conventions in our society through the study of news communication, and to fashion a tool that can be used to charge and change such conventions, a study examined the content of all news articles appearing on the front pages of four newspapers during one given week. The newspapers included the city editions of the "New York Times," the "Washington Post," the "Minneapolis Tribune," and the Iowa City "Press-Citizen." To determine the presentation conventions in the news leads, stories were read to locate focal emphasis slots regularly used for substantive elements. News content angles appearing in the focal emphasis slot position were categorized to articulate valuation conventions. Simple frequency measurements were made for each news valuation category to generate exploratory data about the nature of the news. Measurement was also given to the times that focal emphasis slots in lead sentences were filled by conventional valuation words or phrases. Findings showed that in 171 of 178 news stories, one or more substantive elements were in an anticipated slot--the first word, the sentence subject, and the last word. The categorization of news angles revealed seven conventional valuations: significance, vitality/conflict, human interest, timeliness, prominence, consequences, and proximity. In the 178 news stories, each with 3 emphatic slots, 334 valuations were found to fit these 7 valuation conventions. In sum, news communication appeared to be a conventional art, in form and content, that can be accurately described from a ritual view. (HOD)

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VALUATION AND PRESENTATION CONVENTIONS IN NEWS COMMUNICATION: A FORMULA FOR MEASUREMENT

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VALUATION AND PRESENTATION CONVENTIONS IN NEWS COMMUNICATION:

A FORMULA FOR MEASUREMENT

Introduction

It is fairly common today to say that the study of mass-mediated culture can reveal the values of society. Mass communication scholars, though they differ in purpose and approach, have generally become watchful of values implicit in, for instance, popular music, television programs, and news reports.

What is less common though is the recognition that mass-mediated culture, dominated as it is by conventions and formulas, also provides us with models of and for communication. That is, popular fare in the media expresses cultural conventions of presentation: it captures and affirms the ways that, for instance, we tend to order our talk and our writing.

Traditionally, scholars have not focused on such presentation conventions, as can be seen in the way news has been studied. Scholars have regarded news as value-laden information that is transmitted or disseminated to the public. It is the news content that presumably enlightens the public, integrates society, sets the issue agenda, or performs any number of other functions.

Less visible in the research tradition is the view of news as dramatic text, that is, as a conventional presentation which engages a people in re-enactment of conflicts, roles, valuations--in modes of thinking and relating already pervasive in a culture. Carey (1975) has distinguished the two views in terms of the "transmission" and the "ritual" views of news and communication. In ritual, he suggests, nothing new is learned, but a particular view of the world is portrayed, confirmed, celebrated, affirmed. Editing and reading a newspaper, he says in this regard, is less a matter of sending or gaining information; it is more like attending a mass.

All such rituals are distinguished by conventions: they create and constrain

content and form. In a news ritual, it would follow, conventions constrain angles that reporters take and the ways they write, what they value and how it is presented. If we aim to understand the news communication ritual, we need to grasp the essence of these valuation and presentation conventions. Specifically, we need concrete expression and measurement of what is being celebrated, confirmed, and affirmed so ritualistically in our daily news activity. That, however, requires a tool of analysis, one that can capture both what is being presented and how it is being presented. This study aims to develop such a tool, in a way that increases understanding of the news communication conventions and how they might be changed.

Presentation Convention. Conventions of presentation are particularly apparent in the ways we talk and write about news events. It is unlikely, for example, that many heard or read the phrasing of a recent news story in this way: "There was an assassination, of Anwar Sadat, in Egypt today." Such phrasing violates the traditional rhetorical convention: that we place our most emphatic or important phrases in one of three positions in the sentence--the first word(s), the sentence subject, or the last word(s). In the phrasing of the Sadat assassination story above, all three position slots are, shall we say, wasted: the combined first-word/subject "there" is nondescript, and last word is an innocuous "today."

More in accord with the conventions of presentation, the phrasing of the Sadat story that we heard or read probably went something like this: "Egyptian President Anwar Sadat has been assasinated," which is typical phrasing for broadcast journalism. In social encounters, perhaps preceded by "Did you hear the news?" the typical phrasing might have been, "Sadat's been shot," or even the blunt "Sadat's dead." In all of these last three phrasings, words that crystallize the substance of the sentence are in its emphatic or focal slots. Other words that perform subsidiary connection tasks--such as "has been," "is"--are tucked away in the middle of the sentence.

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In short, presentation like this seems to abide by some fairly simple conventions. The conventions are particularly comprehensible when sentences depart from them and strike us as less important or strangely out-of-focus, as was the case in our first phrasing of the Sadat assassination story.

Valuation Convention. If presentation slotting is so conventionalized, a similar question might be raised about sentence content, the substance that is placed with such regularity in these focal and emphatic slots in news sentences. Is sentence content also conventionalized, to the degree that study of it can provide an index to what we consistently regard as important, to our cultural valuations? This study suggests that valuation conventions can be seen and measured in news reports, once the above conventions of presentation emphasis are recognized.

In the last three phrasings of the Sadat assassination story above, for example, there is consistent focus and slotting emphasis on a prominent person (Sadat) and on the life/death passing (shot, dead, assassinated). Other news systems, placing more emphasis on proletariat action ("assassins") than on prominent personages ("Sadat"), might have structured the valuation this way: "Four assassins have gunned down Egyptian President Anwar Sadat." Then, too, there is the possibility that the life/death value, hyped to the level of the bizarre, might have taken precedence over all other valuation, as reflected in a sentence like this: "Four rifle-toting assassins have left Egyptian President Anwar Sadat dead in a pool of blood." In that sentencing, the prominent person value, represented in "Sadat," was subordinated to the bizarre value, represented in "rifle-toting assassins" and "dead in a pool of blood." In a final example, an entirely different kind of news--and cultural--valuation would have been reflected in a sentence that focused on explaining why rather than announcing what: "Increased political disputes at home have plagued the administration of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat for the last six months, and now they apparently have cost him his life."

Any of these types of sentencing might have been used to present the Sadat

assassination story. In our society, some were, and some were not. The question is, which, and why.

In sum, once conventional slots of emphasis in sentences are known, it seems that we can search for, name, and then measure the frequencies of substantive valuation conventions. Indeed, in such analysis the sentencing would provide a veritable linguistic map of valuation, reflecting the value hierarchy as some news points are subordinately tucked in the middle of sentences while others consistently get emphasized on the ends. Such analysis, particularly of highly formulized lead sentences in current news reports on newspaper front pages, could increase knowledge of which types of valuation consistently get focused on and emphasized in our society. That is, we could see the valuation conventions that predominate here in our time.

Similar analysis of valuation conventions in earlier decades could additionally reveal the direction, the rise or decline, of the valuation. Linked additionally to other expressions and manifestations of the valuation popular in a particular cultural period, such valuation and presentation conventions can, as Cawelti (1976) suggests in his study of formulaic conventions, enrich our understanding of a culture, of the direction, meanings, and values of a people, and of the way they are predisposed to think about their lives.

Such a long-range research effort, however, requires a measurement tool, one that can express and capture both valuation and presentation conventions over time, and that can facilitate the integration of these conventions with those of others in a cultural period. Ultimately, it seems, that tool also should be applicable in the promotion of change. A type of tool that seem to fit these needs is the convention formula, described, illustrated, and developed below.

Review of Literature

A general concept of the convention formula has been developed by Cawelti (1976). He says that a formula has two aspects: a cultural convention indigenous

to a culture or period or group of works, such as the standard setting in a western movie (a town with a saloon, bank, and sheriff's office); and a pattern of action reflective of a universal theme, such as a standard plot--boy meets girl, boy and girl have misunderstanding, boy gets girl. In this study, with its concern for the architectronics of popular culture, the Cawelti formula would be honed to yield more concrete data. This study's cultural conventions are the valuations conventions--types of news story angles consistently taken in front-page news leads; and the study's pattern of action is the presentation convention--the standardized slottings for focal emphasis in sentence structure.

A formula more richly-laden with cultural content has been used in the study of news, but apparently in only one published study. Sperry (1976) suggested that news presentation and audience interpretation are governed by narrative structure, that conventions of story-telling constrain the content and meaning of television news. Rather than conclude that the presentation convention (like the medium) is the message, however, the study at hand aims to use the presentation convention as part of the tool to articulate, measure, and track valuation conventions in our culture.

Valuation procedures and rules in news making have been studied by a number of researchers recently, notably Tuchman (1978) and Gans (1979), but their sociological research aims to show how what is offered as news tends to be an inadvertent outgrowth of the way the news system itself operates and the way the organization is structured. In other words, their research tells us how the valuation comes to be, not what people value and how they come to value it. Tuchman, for instance, gets no closer to content classification than describing one type of news as "what a story!"

Schudson (1978), on the other hand, does provide a cultural studies attempt to account for news content. He charts a developing and changing system of news values which parallels the values of American culture. But his focus tends to be on procedural qualities that constrain the profession, such as its value for objectivity

in reporting, rather than on valuations indigenous to news content.

Carey (1975) suggests that there are culturally meaningful valuations confirmed and celebrated daily in the encounter with the news, though as pointed out above, their character needs to be articulated and concretized.

Concrete values in news content have been ticked off in any number of news-writing texts, but their definitions remain loose, and they have not been related in any way to presentation conventions. MacDougall (1972), for instance, says that well-known names have the news value of "prominence," but so, too, he says, do the names of organizations, large cities, celebrated cities (like Las Vegas), names of guests at social events, and, for that matter, names of any subscribers.

Others, like Badii and Ward (1980) most recently, have attempted to articulate and measure "dimensions" that news editors believe characterize news: Significance, measured in terms of adjudged impact; Normality, with oddity and conflict elements; and Prominence, whether stories involve known or unknown principals.

Many consistencies emerge in these various lists, and they are helpful in providing the names of valuation categories as well as definitions for coding the valuation conventions.

Such studies of content-related valuation, whether in the news writeup or in the news encounter, do not provide, however, a tool for change, a technique that might be used or a direction that might be pursued to alter or redirect adverse cultural trends. As Carey (1975) wisely reminds us, the reason we turn to study of communication conventions is twofold: to grasp the convention process and to know how to rebuild it so that we can reshape our common culture.

The formula tool discussed here, I submit, is functional in that regard. Its twofold structure, featuring both a presentation and a valuation convention, admits the possibility of making changes in one convention but not in the other, thus maintaining a convention base, which seems necessary for public recognition, comprehension, and acceptance during reorganization of a popular convention. This

reorganization strategy is evident in television news, which increased adherence to stereotypical news valuations while altering drastically, as Weaver (1975) points out, the presentation convention. Television news replaced, for example, the summary lead and inverted pyramid structure of newspaper presentation; television's presentation increasingly has used an evolving narrative structure, which builds news stories around a theme. Unfortunately, these changes in television news are not movements toward the humane, substantive route that most of us would select, but the potential usability of the two-part formula in the reorganization of conventions remains quite apparent: it frees one leg for change.

Research Needs and Aims--A Summary

In a long-range research effort to reshape our common culture by grasping and reorganizing communication conventions, there are numerous research needs. The most immediate need, I have suggested thus far, is to fashion a measurement tool, one that can be functional in change and yet expressive of conventional order. The two-part formula, with its valuation and presentation conventions, would seem to fit that need.

In fashioning the measurement tool, however, there are several additional needs. First, one must determine the presentation convention, in this case the sentence beamwork indigenous to news leads. Then, one must articulate the valuation conventions, the angles or castings of news most frequently given focal emphasis slots.

In doing this, the study at hand has three aims: (1) to increase knowledge about the nature of news, particularly its valuation and presentation conventions; (2) to enrich understanding of communication conventions in our society, through study of news communication; and (3) to fashion a tool that can be used to chart and change such conventions.

Methodology

A content analysis was made of all news articles (n=178) appearing on the

front pages of four newspapers during one given week. The papers, selected to represent different regions and market sizes, were the city editions of the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Minneapolis Tribune, and the Iowa City Press-Citizen.

To determine the presentation conventions in the news leads, the stories were read to locate focal emphasis slots regularly used for substantive elements. Substantive elements were defined as those parts of the story focused on or developed in subsequent paragraphs.

In articulating valuation conventions in news leads, news content angles appearing in the focal emphasis slot-positions were categorized. That is, words and phrases were coded as linguistic representatives of valuation. In this initial analysis to develop the categories, only the author performed the coding task.

To generate exploratory data about the nature of news, simple frequency measurements were made for each news valuation category.

To increase our understanding not only of the content but also of the extent of communication conventions in our culture, the research also measured times that focal emphasis slots in lead sentences were filled by conventional valuation words or phrases.

The simplicity of the methodology, it should be noted, is regarded as adequate only for this initial stage of the research. This study might be classified as exploratory or developmental.

Findings

The Presentation Convention. It was anticipated that news lead sentences would adhere to a fairly simple convention of presentation, in which substantive elements in the news story would appear with some regularity in three focal emphasis slots in the sentences: the first word(s), the sentence subject, and the last word(s).

X X X — First Word(s)

X — Subject

X X X — Last Word(s).

In 171 of 178 news stories, the anticipated convention was true to a degree: one or more substantive elements were in an anticipated slot. In only seven articles were all substantive elements--the points focused on and developed in the news story--tucked away in the middle of the lead sentence, in a slot normally unemphasized.

However, the presentation convention was found to be more complex than anticipated, due in part to the large number of substantive elements packed into news leads. In some cases, compound sentences simply doubled the number of substantive elements, and the presentation convention redoubled, as the following lead sentence illustrates. (The story's substantive elements are underlined.)

> A devastating freeze in the vineyards of upstate New York threatens to wipe out most of the grape crop of 1981, and a severe cutback in wine production is being predicted.

In subsequent paragraphs, the story developed each of the underlined, substantive elements: it addressed how extensive the freeze damage was, how much of the 1981 crop was lost, how severe the cutback would be, and the credibility of the prediction.

In short, the basic presentation convention holds rather remarkably, even in complex variations. Writers seem to recognize the focal emphasis slots in sentences, and with a good deal of regularity in news leads, they place in those slots words crystallizing or signaling substantive points they later develop.

Nonetheless, the presentation convention has a significant variation. Substantive elements frequently collect around commas or other internal punctuation, as illustrated in this example:

> A runaway lumber truck smashed into a downtown restaurant Wednesday afternoon and burst into flames, killing at least three people, injuring 26 others and damaging more than a dozen parked cars, authorities said.

The writer developed each element underlined, thus letting the commas function as if they were periods--a common variation on the basic convention.

This story also developed the information about the restaurant and damages, even though the signal-words were neither in focal emphasis slots nor next to internal punctuation. Some exceptions, however, seemingly will have to be tolerated: conventions are regularities, not absolutes; and the use of the language is predictable, but not automatic.

The above sentence also violates the standard presentation convention because the last word "said"--in one of the emphasis slots--was not a substantive element in this story. In stories that cast doubt on what sources said, however, "said" would be a substantive element, rightly emphasized. Though the sentence breaks the standard convention, it does use a peculiar journalistic convention: hanging attribution--"authorities said," "the Pentagon announced," "according to informed sources." Occurring in nearly 14 percent of lead sentences, this journalistic convention posed some difficulty as we analyzed slotted content to categorize valuation conventions.

The Valuation Convention. Once the three most emphatic sentence slots were determined, we categorized the news angle that appeared in them. This analysis revealed seven conventional valuations, often with two or more castings. The valuation categories are defined and then illustrated in their typical phrasing below.

In the case of the first valuation, significance, for example, the data suggested that reporters tend to ferret out and focus on any precedents, and in their writeups they specifically declare "firsts," such as, "In his first major speech since the assassination attempt, President Reagan . . .." In this case, the entire string of words preceding the subject ("Reagan") is the "significance" valuation. It is a common form, occurring in one of the three slotted positions in 20 percent of the news leads studied.

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1. Significance

   a. angle on a historical precedent: "for the first time in X years," "the first Middle Eastern head of state to visit the Reagan White House," "highest rate in four years."

   b. angle on very large extent: "the biggest crowd ever to," "cheering thousands."

   c. angle on the unexpected, how many or what happened in relation to what had been publicly predicted or expected, an upset: "upset victory," "in a come-from-behind win," "in an unexpected surge."

2. Vitality/Conflict

   a. birth or death announcement, age if very old or very young: "killed," "dead," "injured," "slaughtered."

   b. threats to life, property, or peace; accident and conflict (political/labor/court) reports, with angle on protest, anger, violence, injury, or death: "a careening car," "wildcat strikers," "an armed robber," "sign-waving protesters," "accusation," "smashed."

3. Human Interest

   a. the bizarre: bass attack swimmers off Florida coast, quadruple amputee mother in a courtroom undresses her baby with her teeth to prove she can care for it, gory details of accident or crime; "leaving her raped and naked in the cold," "before putting the bodies in trash bags"; often measurable only in full sentences with bizarre elements scattered about.

   b. the heart-touching: crippled grandmother cares for streetwise ghetto kids; child running across tarmac scooped up in father's arms upon return from being Iran hostage; cuddly animal focus; angle on elements of these sorts for sake of sentiment. Sentences often begin cold with the name of a previously-unknown person.

4. Timeliness

   a. a signal/slug word for a story in the news climate, one fastened on and dogged daily by the media for its conglomerate of news valuations: Iran hostages, inflation and unemployment, Reagan budget cuts, Polish strikers, AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia, Watergate.

   b. latest update information in a climate or short-run continuing story: newest inflation/unemployment figures; daily progress of a week-long effort to reach mine accident victims alive.

5. Prominence

   a. name of a person or institution recognized by most subscribers: President Reagan, Jesse James, Mayor Byrne, General Motors Corporation, Robert Redford, any Kennedy.

   b. name of a celebrated, enchanting city: Las Vegas, Rio.

6. Consequences

a specifically-cited change that will occur for a large group of people: " X because of new welfare rules," "will increase taxes x percent." *Characterized by use of cue words:* "as a result of," "because of," "if," as in "if the x group does y"; cue words usually appear in mid-sentence, with consequence spelled out concretely on either end.

7. Proximity

a. local angle on a national story: reference to an X-City man aboard a plane that crashed and killed 100; local woman named to national post; representative of national group visits local area, as in "Four Japanese businessmen were in x town." Names home city.

b. public event that involves community or large segment of it: town meeting, city council action, a school closing, summer storm report; often tied with a consequences angle or a town-roundup-report angle.

This list of valuation conventions seems to account for all the recognizable types of angles and casting that were slotted in the emphatic positions of the sentences. Other words and phrases not accounted for here did, of course, appear in some of the slots. But they were not readily categorizable with a sample of the size used here.

The Nature of News. A total of 178 news stories appeared on the front pages of the four newspapers analyzed for one given week. (The 66 photo stories or accompanying photographs and their captions were not studied because of the focus here on a measuring tool for verbal messages.)

In the 178 news stories, each with three emphatic slots, 334 valuations were found to fit the seven basic conventions defined above. The average was 1.87 slotted valuation conventions per story. (Additional exploratory study by the author suggests that the valuation density decreases in stories that appear inside newspaper sections.)

The most popular focal emphases, as Table I shows, were on the timeliness, prominence, and vitality/conflict valuations. The front pages tend to carry, in short, stories focusing on well-known people and conflicts that the press is dogging. The coverage of the trial of lovestruck Jean Harris, accused of murdering

a well-known diet-book doctor, was a case in point during the week studied. Such multi-valuation stories seem to be the basic stock of the newspaper front page.

Insert Table 1 about here

Though the research does not warrant reporting of sophisticated statistics at this stage, little variance was found in the valuation conventions across the four papers. One valuation convention, however, bears watching in research with a larger sample: there seemed to be a direct relationship of the size of the community and the number of proximity valuations appearing in news stories: the smaller the community, the more the proximity angle stories.

Communication Conventions. This study revealed highly conventionalized patterns in both valuation and presentation. Of the 178 news lead sentences studied, as Table I shows, 40 percent reflected a timeliness valuation, 39 percent had a prominence valuation, and 38 percent had a vitality/conflict valuation.

Further, in 82.4 percent of the lead sentences, half or more of the valuations were situated predictably in emphatic slots. Indeed, 47.7 percent of the sentences had all news valuations in them in an emphatic slot. Only 11 (6.2 percent) of the 178 sentences did not have any of their news valuations slotted.

In sum, news communication appears to be a conventional art, in form and content.

Discussion

This initial content analysis, designed to develop the formula tool, inspires a number of refinements. The presentation convention, for example, has richer variations than anticipated, but their complexity can be accommodated

easily: all slots adjoining internal punctuation should be designated focal emphasis slots. This change can be verified in subsequent research that measures the ratio of substantive elements and position slots.

The hanging attribution convention--somewhat peculiar to journalists because of concern about libel--poses no problem if one simply disregards it when comparing news and non-news accounts. In any study that attempts to address the nature of news or its communication conventions, however, it would be necessary to continue measurement.

Words and phrases appearing in the presentation slots tend to be highly conventionalized, thus easing the categorization task and the training of coders necessary for future research. The lack of coders in this initial effort, of course, is one of its major drawbacks.

The valuation categories named seemed to encompass the majority of recognizable story angles and news castings. Nonetheless, about 20 percent of the words and phrases in the presentation slots escaped categorization. These remaining emphasis-slot words can be categorized in future research, which should have a larger sample and categorization of all words adjoining punctuation.

Conclusions and Implications

This study, which develops, defines, and measures categories of conventional valuation and presentation of the news, provides a concrete description for the production and maintenance aspects of the ritual model of news. The degree of conventionality discovered and the patterned packaging that makes the conventions so readily identifiable lend support to the ritual view as a potent description of the nature of news in our culture. The crude measures, however, seem tolerable only in this initial, developmental effort. The categories also are in need of refinement and extension through continued research with a larger sample.

Though the conventions may be graspable here, they must be related to the other symbolic expressions and manifestations of them in our culture. The his-

torical rise or decline of each convention should be measured and charted in future research. Not only would such research alert us to the convention trends, but also it would increase our understanding of news as a phenomenon of cultural periods, particularly when other manifestations of the valuation and presentation conventions are compared and integrated.

Such research and its resultant richer perspective is facilitated by the formula tool initially developed here. All too often research into values expressed in popular culture, particularly in different cultural periods, suffers from arbitrary focus: researchers can fasten on, for instance, a perceived preponderance of conflict stories or prominent personages in the news, claiming perhaps that the newsmakers create and spread such values. The formula tool developed here provides a guard against arbitrary bias and a way beyond limited perspective.

The formula is a guard against bias in that it is an empirical tool that resists either arbitrary focus on or exclusion of valuations: one measures whatever is in designated focal emphasis slots in sentences. Any changes in the slots over time can be checked by determining position slots for the substantive elements that are focused on and developed in subsequent sentences or paragraphs. Indeed, the tool can be used to reveal and relate minute differences in both a hierarchy of presentation slots and a hierarchy of valuation.

Besides reducing bias, the formula provides a way beyond limited perspective: it enables a researcher to relate findings from the news area to some other area of cultural study. With the presentation positions and valuation categories standardized, a researcher could, for example, measure differences in the coverage of conflicts involving political officials in news accounts and memoir accounts. Value hierarchies evident in each account could be linked to show the broader social context of a valuation, or placed in contrast to show, for instance, valuation variance between a politician and the press, as evident in their different presentation and valuation conventions.

The convention formula also enables researchers to show how news accounts interact with other aspects of culture and communication. That is, one can use the formula to chart valuation and presentation conventions over time, showing, for instance, the rise of focal emphasis on valuation of violence and conflict, whether this disturbing trend was initiated in news accounts or in other popular fare, and the paths of its spread. A convention formula, with its slotting structure and valuation categories standardized, can elicit empirically a set of footprints in the study of cultural interaction.

In the final analysis, the tool also provides us with an instrument that can be used in the implementation of change. It makes readily apparent the types of conventions that are the mainstays of the established order. Further, though, the two-part structure of the tool, with both presentation and valuation conventions, opens the possibility of changing one part of the convention but not the other. With that possibility also comes the prospect of making our changes in communication conventions evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

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Table 1

Frequency and Percentage Distributions for Valuation Conventions in Three Emphatic Slots in 178 Lead Sentences

Valuation Convention	Number of Valuations	Percent of Valuations	Percent of Valuation Convention in Emphatic Slots	Percent of 178 Lead Sentences with Valuation Convention
Significance	35	10.5	6.6	19.7
Vitality/Conflict	68	20.4	12.7	38.2
Human Interest	26	7.8	4.9	14.6
Timeliness	72	21.5	13.5	40.4
Prominence	70	21.9	13.1	39.3
Consequences	31	9.3	5.8	17.4
Proximity	32	9.6	6.0	18.0
Total	334	100		